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TAGS: [ASEC](#) [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [JO](#) [KHMN](#)

SUBJECT: SUSPECTS IN 2002 MA'AN RIOTS FINALLY HAVE THEIR DAY IN COURT

REF: A. 04 AMMAN 10304

[1](#)B. 04 AMMAN 05476

Classified By: CDA David Hale for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

[1](#)1. (U) More than two years after riots shook the restive southern town of Ma'an, the State Security Court in January finally opened the trial of 108 individuals suspected of involvement. The violence in November 2002 left six people dead, including two police officers, and resulted in criticism that the government mishandled the situation. Only 13 people appeared in court on January 9, and all pleaded innocent to the charges. The remaining 95 suspects will be tried in absentia. Chief among the defendants is local extremist Mohammad al-Shalabi (aka Abu Sayyaf), who was sentenced on December 27 to 15 years in jail on weapons charges related to a separate alleged terrorist plot (ref A).

[1](#)2. (U) The charge sheet is long. The group is accused of carrying out terrorist acts that led to the death of an individual, possessing automatic weapons with illicit intent, plotting subversive acts by using flammable substances, and illegal public assembly with the intent of causing riots. They also were charged with importing weapons, including hand grenades and rocket launchers, and possessing unlicensed guns.

[1](#)3. (C) The trial so far has been marked by unusual levels of acrimony. The prosecution introduced several witnesses, including a Ma'an-based security official who testified that he found weapons and machine guns at the home of one of the defendants. Officers also testified that anonymous individuals had thrown Molotov cocktails and fired at them while on duty in Ma'an, resulting in injuries. In contrast to the defendants' allegations that they were forced to sign confessions while blindfolded, security witnesses told the court that the suspects confessed willingly, "without being subjected to any form of torture or duress." A session on January 17 was interrupted at least twice by defendants who cursed the judge and prosecutor, and screamed at witnesses, calling them "liars" and "traitors." In one instance, one defendant threatened revenge against a police officer for his "lies." A reporter who was present told poloff that the judge had to adjourn the hearing at one point for nearly an hour until order was restored. At the end of the two-hour session, the judge adjourned until January 31, when the court will reconvene to hear more testimony from prosecution witnesses.

[1](#)4. (C) Comment: Ma'an's economy is underdeveloped; tribal power there is still significant; Saudi influence is strong; and Salafi (and even Takfiri) tendencies widespread (ref B). Long a center of opposition to the government, Ma'an has repeatedly witnessed unrest over bread and gasoline price increases over the past 20 years. The GOJ probably delayed this trial in the hope that sympathy for the Ma'an rioters would dissipate, and memories of the suppression of the uprising would fade. Heightened concerns about terrorist threats in Jordan (and fear of regime retaliation) may mitigate against popular expressions of sympathy for the Ma'an rioters. However, the animosity will continue to play out in the courtroom as the GOJ makes an example of the Ma'an troublemakers.

[1](#)5. (U) Baghdad minimize considered.

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HALE